



Hillsdale College Hillsdale, Michigan 49242 Vol. 5, No. 12
December, 1976

THE SOMETHING-FOR-NOTHING SYNDROME

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Mr. Read delivered this presentation on the Hillsdale College campus in October as part of the Ludwig von Mises Lecture Series.

Blind Leaders of the Blind. Matthew XV: 14

The something-for-nothing syndrome, like all syndromes, is a number of symptoms occurring together and characterizing a specific disease. We must give it careful analysis and understanding if we are to effect a turnabout for the better. It is a social malady and a vicious one at that.

Without exception, those devoted to the freedom way of life — if they understand their devotion — look with disfavor on those who advocate and participate in something-for-nothing schemes. Karl Marx phrased this political gimmick, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" and, of course, by armed force. Some philosophers of India, in an ancient and sacred text, gave this evil the denunciation it deserves:

Sin is not the violation of a law or convention . . . but *ignorance* . . . which seeks its own private gain at the expense of others.*

Why did these wise Hindus label this common practice of feathering the nest of some at the expense of others as "ignorance"? Because that is precisely what this sin amounts to. Henry Hazlitt adds his wisdom:

Economics . . . is the science of tracing the effects of some proposed or existing policy not only on some special interest in the short run, but *on the general interest in the long run.*

Most politico-economic policies in our time are in response to the demands of this or that special interest group, while the general interest is ignored. Further, the long-run effect is overlooked in order that short-run "gains" may be achieved. This is the road to disaster, and no turnabout is possible short of a greater reliance on "time-lapse thinking." Let Walt Disney's demonstration explain what I mean by time-lapse thinking.

Disney planted a rose seedling and made a motion picture of its growth, flicking a single frame every day or so until the plant was mature and the rose had bloomed. When he showed this film on the screen at sixteen frames per second, we then witnessed the whole beautiful phenomenon — the unfolding of a rosebud — in less than a minute.

*See *The Bhagavadgita*, translated by S. Radhakrishnan (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 224 pp.

imprimis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things) . . .

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Disney's time-lapse photography enabled us to experience an improvement in "frequency perception"; viewers are able to see the long-run effects of short-run causes. This is why I urge some time-lapse thinking.

While the time-lapse photography and time-lapse thinking are similar in that each collapses time, there is an important difference. The former reduces the time between causes and effects that have already taken place; the latter requires that time be collapsed as related to future effects of present causes. True, no person has a crystal ball, nor could he read it if he had one. Yet, I believe there is a way of foreseeing what effects certain actions will have.

Carry this belief a step further. The easiest and perhaps the only way to be certain that a short-run action is a gain or loss is to discover what its long-run effects will be. Why? *There is no such thing as a short-run gain that is not also a long-run gain, and vice versa.* As Emerson wrote, "the end pre-exists in the means." It is axiomatic that constructive service of the individual's purposes or of the general interest can never emerge from destructive means. Thus, we must collapse time, resort to time-lapse thinking.

To illustrate: Is thievery a short-run gain for the thief? Most thieves think it is or they would not steal. Having a stunted perception, they fail to realize that the loss in life-values far exceeds the gain in loot. Were the thief capable of time-lapse thinking, he would clearly see that a population of thieves would perish. The long-run effect would be disastrous; therefore, the short-run action — the means — is disastrous and evil.

Direct theft is practiced by comparatively few of the total population. Most people find it unnecessary to do time-lapse thinking to put thievery in its proper place. However, millions of these same people not only condone but participate in legal plunder, that is, they urge government to do the looting for them. They see nothing wrong with this; indeed, they regard the loot as a gain. Perhaps the only way for them to set their thinking straight is a resort to time-lapse thinking.

In a nutshell, let these millions project their practices into the future — everyone doing what many are now doing, that is, everyone being paid for not working. Clearly, were there no work there would be no loot to take, nothing to plunder. As with thievery, all would perish. By the simple device of

collapsing time, the future effect of present actions would become obvious. This means that living off others is not even a short-run gain. A few paltry dollars at the price of surrendering responsibility for self — the very essence of being — amounts to an enormous net loss.

Many farmers get paid for not farming and regard the payments as gains. Apply this political nostrum to all productive activity, not only getting paid for not farming but getting paid for not generating electricity, not drilling for and refining oil, not making clothes and autos, and so on. Project such practices into the future and observe the self-evident consequences. Time-lapse thinking will reveal the fallacy; it will serve as an eye-opener, a needed shock treatment.

Reflect on the businessmen who seek political protection against competition, domestic as well as foreign. Assume the universality of this craving for short-run "gains" and then assess the future. What would be the economic picture? It would look like ancient feudalism or medieval mercantilism or modern communism.

No need for more illustrations; a thousand and one could be cited. Time-lapse thinking not only is invaluable in deciding on sound economic policy but can be used to arrive at the correctness of present actions in all fields — education, religion, politics, or whatever.

From such thinking stems this helpful conclusion: fret not for the morrow, only for today. Why? Because the morrow is a life-style edifice structured from today's actions. Wrote Addison: "This is the world of seeds, of causes, and of tendencies; the other is the world of harvests and results and of perfected and eternal consequences." Thus, if today's actions are as right as one can make them, then the morrow will be as good as possible.

Now to the something-for-nothing syndrome that lies at the root of the destructive conduct so far touched upon: an absurd banality. What is it, really?

— It is the absence of a belief, an intellectual vacuum and moral blindness — and not even recognized as such.

— The Good Society is something rare and precious and is taken for granted. That it requires no human input — *nothing* — is a naive assumption by nearly everyone from all walks of life. "Blind followers of the blind," indeed.

If an appropriate belief existed, of what would it consist? At the very least, the following:

- I -Rising above the prevailing mediocrity, that is, the input must equal the take-out.
- II- Citizen participation in the search for improved ideas, ideals, and moral perfection.
- III- Organizational common sense.

I

Rising above the prevailing mediocrity requires of the individual that he or she recognize that a good society stems exclusively from the habit of right thinking and doing on the part of its citizens. By the same token, a decadent society is the penalty of sloppy thinking and careless action. Briefly, the extent of the take-out is determined by the quality and amount of the input. No input, no take-out. We cannot have this desirable *something* for an unforgivable *nothing*. This should be self-evident but, by and large, the fact is rarely perceived in our day and age. Why?

It seems plain to me that input and take-out never occur simultaneously. You and I, more than likely, can take out right now what we did not put in today or yesterday, or ever. For example, there are thousands of millionaires whose intellectual input has never risen above zero. This does not mean that the input was lacking but, rather, that it occurred at an earlier time, beginning with those individuals who wrote the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, plus numerous responsible citizens since then — authors and sustainers of the American miracle: the greatest outburst of creative energy in all history.

Simply stated, the vast majority of present-day Americans are the beneficiaries of an enormous momentum in whose rise they have had no part. Thus, they assume that the beneficence which graces their lives is simply their due, a natural blessing.

Stated another way, the victims of this particular something-for-nothing syndrome are more or less innocent slackers, unknowingly riding on the coat-tails of the few who have the intelligence to realize that take-out presupposes input. To rise above mediocrity is nothing less than aligning one's self with reality, that is, participating right now in an input of thoughtful, responsible citizenship that makes an increasing take-out possible not only for self but for generations yet to come. And why not? Getting into life is the way to get the most out of life — *to be* rather than not to be.

II

The Good Society is impossible in the absence of a natural aristocracy as defined by Jefferson: "There is a natural aristocracy among men. It is composed of virtues and talents." In my view, the something-for-nothing syndromes in their various forms — nonsensical every one — are no more abundant today than earlier. Why more blatant now than say a century ago? The answer is clear: nonsensical notions are held in abeyance when the natural aristocracy is riding high, when there are standard-setters of excellence. Hanford Henderson also referred to this glorious ascendancy, to the exemplar, as "the aristocrat":

He may be a day laborer, an artisan, a shop-keeper, a professional man, a writer, a statesman. It is not a matter of birth, or occupation, or education. It is an attitude of mind carried into daily action. . . a religion. It is the disinterested, passionate love of excellence . . . everywhere and in everything; the aristocrat, to deserve the name, must love it in himself, in his own alert mind, in his own illuminated spirit, and he must love it in others; must love it in all human relations and occupations and activities; in all things in earth or sea or sky.

There you have it. Given such high exemplarity, people refrain from making fools of themselves before those held in high esteem — silence. But let there be a slump in the aristocracy — as today — among businessmen, laborers, artisans, writers, "educators," clergy, political officeholders, and the foolish notions come forth as termites from a rotten stump.

The remedy for this malady? The restoration of a natural aristocracy. As suggested previously, this consists of citizen participation in the search for improved ideas, ideals, moral perfection, virtues — integrity being the foremost — and talents. Very well, but who shall lead the way? The world's most important person: that individual observed in the mirror.

III

Finally, an absolutely necessary component, if we are to be graced with a good society, is what I have referred to as "organizational common sense." Our beliefs must consist of this, not only in understanding but in strict observance — day-to-day adherence thereto.

A fact rarely reflected upon is that man is at once a

social and an individualistic being. Find out what the social side is, and all else is individualistic — each free to act creatively as he pleases. The individual decides how he shall act creatively. However, when it comes to the social side, neither I nor you nor anyone else should decide for the others. That's organizational nonsense: dictatorship — the Command Society, not the Good or Free Society.

The spokesman for the social side should be none other than an agency of society which we call "government." And to keep it in bounds as an agency of free society — not letting it get out of bounds as now in the U.S.A. — requires an organizational common sense presently lacking. My own thinking started on this more than twenty years ago. A noted English scholar in a lecture remarked, "Government is a necessary evil." My rebuttal went as follows:

Government is said to be a necessary evil. The saying appears to be without merit. For can anything be at once necessary and evil? True, all governments have had a history of evil-doing, more or less. However, it does not follow from the experience that their good is indistinguishable from their evil. Their evil begins when they step out of bounds. The only necessity is that their evil actions be discontinued. Such an achievement is unlikely until the principles prescribing the boundary lines are searched for and found.

Very well — how do we draw the line between what government should do, and what government should not do? This question cannot be answered unless one knows what government is and what it is not. What, in essence, is government? Woodrow Wilson gave the correct answer: "The essential nature of government is *organized force*." The edicts of a government, be they right or wrong, are enforced by a constabulary — a *physical force*.

This physical force may be symbolized by the clenched fist. Find out what the fist *can* and *cannot* do and we will know what government should and should not do — not necessarily what it will or will not do. Bear in mind that our purpose here is to discover where the line *should* be drawn. So what can the clenched fist do? It can restrain, inhibit, prohibit, penalize. Knowing this, the next question is: What, in all good conscience, should be restrained, prohibited, inhibited, penalized? The answer comes near in the moral code: Curb the destructive actions of men — fraud, violence, predation, misrepresentation — thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, and

the like. This is all that government can do as a *helpful* agency of society—period.

But it is even more important to recognize what government — a physical force — can *not* do. It cannot create. Government is not a creative force, never has been, nor can it ever be. Creativity in all instances — no exceptions — is a spiritual force in the sense that an idea is spiritual, or a discovery, an invention, an insight, an intuitive flash.

Everything by which we live has its origin in the spiritual before it manifests itself in the material. A water glass, for instance, is inconceivable had not some cave dweller eons ago discovered how to harness fire. The planes or autos in which we luxuriously transport ourselves would be out of the question had not some Hindu a thousand years ago invented the concept of zero. All modern chemistry, physics, astronomy and the like would be impossible were we limited to Roman numerals. These flashes of discovery number in countless trillions since the dawn of human consciousness.

How, then, should we draw the line on proper functions of government? Limit government to the suppression of destructive actions and leave all creative actions — no exception, education or whatever — to men acting freely, voluntarily, cooperatively, competitively, privately. To me, this is the first step in organizational common sense.

The second step, though seldom perceived, is no less important: *Responsibility and authority should always be dispensed commensurately*. If you saddle me with responsibility to perform this or that task, give me the authority I need to do it. True, I may seek counsel from you or others but the responsibility for the performance is mine and no one else's. I have adhered to this rule for years, as head of a wholesale produce business during my youth, as manager of Chambers of Commerce, and for thirty years as president of FEE. A rare working relationship is the result: no one works *for* me, all work *with* me — truly a partnership. This brings out the best in all of us, the potential creativity and, thus, productivity of each is realized.

Recently, I was on a 747 jet from Honolulu to the mainland. There were a dozen or more stewardesses to accommodate the 300 passengers. Never in over 2,000,000 miles of flying have I observed such service. Wondering why, I looked around to see who might be responsible for this performance, but no

such person was in evidence. Finally, I spotted the person, a quiet young lady, and we discussed the secret of her success — all working *with*, not *for*, her. The principle of responsibility and authority had not occurred to this lady — the practice just came naturally, a phenomenon that happens to only a few. But know the principle, and the highest form of cooperation follows as a matter of course.

While this principle often seems to function in private affairs without being well understood, it appears to have no recognition at all in social affairs, the subject of this thesis. The millions of our political dictocrats (excuse me, they are not *mine*) assume authority over *our* lives. They dictate the kind of "education" *our* children shall experience; what *our* production may and may not be; what and with whom we may exchange the fruits of *our* labor; what goods and services we may enjoy; and countless other edicts — all financed with *our* earnings and savings.

As one sage wrote:

Authority intoxicates,
And makes sots of magistrates
The fumes of it invade the brain,
And make men selfish, proud, and vain.

Multiply the millions of "magistrates" times the mistakes each of them makes and the total is incalculable — beyond anyone's ability to imagine. Bear in mind that *coercive control of any creative action is a mistake*. Why does authority run rampant and make "sots" of dictocrats? For one reason and one only: all authority and *no responsibility*. As a result, it is the citizenry who are penalized for the errors of dictocrats. These latter get off scot-free,

as we say — that is, they can err endlessly without suffering the consequences.

Now assess the situation where authority and responsibility commensurately dispensed — true, a hopeful vision. There would be a dramatic change in conduct. Penalization would go hand-in-hand with all errors, as when running a business or any other kind of private organization: losses or even bankruptcy. In the case of government all office-holders, elected or appointed, would experience with every error a loss of face or esteem or votes. And just as dramatic would be the decline in the number of appointees, a reduction to no more than an essential bureaucracy — social drama of the first order.

Has this hopeful vision any chance of becoming a reality? Not the slightest unless we believe it has. 'Twould be a miracle, but keep in mind that faith does, in fact, work miracles.

The solution to this something-for-nothing syndrome rests on an acute recognition that a good society is impossible short of an intellectual, moral, and spiritual input by at least a few citizens — the natural aristocrats.

Were our vision to become a reality, those in government would no longer devote themselves to promoting their inept brand of good with our resources. Instead, they would confine their efforts to removing the bad in order that the truly good might prevail. No longer would we refer to "blind leaders of the blind" but, rather, to the intelligent leaders of those who can see. Everyone would be free to act creatively as he or she pleases — freedom in its ideal sense.

FREEDOM FUND TOPS \$3.25 MILLION

Hillsdale College has initiated a drive to insure its independence in the years ahead by launching a campaign to raise \$29 million. In honor of the official Freedom Fund kickoff, the college hosted a weekend program November 12-13 including a black tie dinner and seminar program the following day on "The Current Condition of American Society and the Prospects for the Future." At the kickoff dinner it was announced that Hillsdale College has already topped the \$3.25 million mark in its drive. A reprint of the remarks by all of the weekend's speakers is available from Hillsdale College on request.

Joining us for the gala kickoff dinner as the keynote speaker was Treasury Secretary William E. Simon, along with Dr. Benjamin A. Rogge as master of ceremonies, and many special guests, including the Honorable Clare Booth Luce, former Ambassador to Italy.

A memorable seminar on Saturday included presentations by William F. Buckley Jr. of *National Review* and *Firing Line*; Robert Bleiberg of *Barron's*; British economist Arthur Shenfield; Congressman Philip Crane of Illinois, who is the Freedom Fund campaign chairman; Dr. David Meiselman of Virginia Polytechnic Institute; George Stigler of the University of Chicago, and Paul Weaver of *Fortune*.

Hillsdale College is marked by its strong independence and its emphasis on academic excellence. It holds that the traditional values of Western civilization, especially including the free society of responsible individuals, are worthy of defense. In maintaining these values, the college has remained independent throughout its 132 years, neither soliciting nor accepting government funding for its operations.